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The Plump Cinderella; Or Politics without Politics
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The plump Cinderella; or politics without politics

PAUL NOLAN
interrogates the development of the community and voluntary sectors here

I first felt something was up when, in 1992, I heard the then Secretary of State, Peter Brooke, address remarks to those in 'the terrorist community.' I had got used to the word 'community' being applied like a warm glow to everything from dental care to loan sharking. During the Thatcher years it was a key part of the official Orwellian doublespeak: emptying the psychiatric hospitals, for example, was described as a process of 'community care'. Still, enough of the original sense of the word remained with me to find it peculiar to think of a congenial group of balaclava-wearing figures waiting politely to hear what the Secretary of State had to say to them.

But that, as they say, was then. And this is now, and the balaclavas are off and every group in society—former terrorists, prison officers, businessmen and women, the unemployed—everyone represents themselves as a community.

Every group, that is, apart from one. Politicians are outside this. Not only are they outside it, community politics here sometimes presents itself in the same way that civil society did in the Eastern European states in the 1980s, as a form of anti-politics. The whole basis of the new Civic Forum is a tacit acceptance of the notion that representative politics, as delivered by the ballot box, will not be sufficient to create a democratic society in Northern Ireland; other forms of participative democracy will have to be incorporated into the body politic.

The acceptance of that argument, and its institutionalisation within the Assembly, represents a considerable achievement for those who championed it most strongly, the voluntary sector in Northern Ireland. Not only that, but the proportion of seats set aside for voluntary organisations—18 out of 60 seats, making it the largest single block—represents, on the face of it, a stunning victory, particularly when you bear in mind that a further 8 places assigned to victims, community relations and culture are likely to go to voluntary organisations. Just by way of comparison, the trade unions, business and farmers (the traditional social partners) have a combined total of only 17 seats.

How did we get to this position? In the early days—let's be more specific, at the start of the troubles—voluntary organisations used to see themselves in the Cinderella role, surrounded by ugly sisters, starved of resources, and having to fight gamely on. It wasn't just a perception, it was a reality. When Tom Hadden and Martyn Turner emerged blinking in the daylight and clutching the first inky copy of *Fortnight* they were just doing what lots of people were doing in 1970, which was giving up their time voluntarily and contributing money from their own pockets to pursue something they thought was worth doing. All over Northern Ireland there were people trying to help the families that had been burnt out, or establishing food co-operatives, or taking kids from the frontline areas off on holiday or setting up peoples' assemblies or trying to get dialogue between Protestants and Catholics. Or whatever. There was prodigious energy, and an optimism that this ragbag of people could create a sort of counter-culture (there, I've given my age away) that would not only challenge the rising sectarianism, but would give expression to a new radical politics.

Youthful dreams, I admit, embarrassing in their way and I only mention any of that here in passing. Now that the doors have burst open and Cinderella has announced her triumphant entry to the ball it is impossible not to notice that she has become a little, well, plump. The pinched appearance has gone and the new, well-resourced look is drawing comment from the others in the hall. The politicians are not

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the only ones to scent hubris in this new situation; the trade unions and the CBI have also been heard to mutter about proportion and relative weighting. Size matters—at least to them.

The voluntary sector has two responses to this criticism. The first is to argue the case in the language of size and scale, a task undertaken each year by the Northern Ireland Council of Voluntary Action through its 'State of the Sector Report'. The most recent figures do give pause for thought. There are currently 5000 voluntary or community organisations in Northern Ireland, employing approximately 33,500 staff. The gross income is put at £514 million and the asset base at £574 million. There are many other impressive figures given in this digest of statistics, and they all signpost the reader to the same conclusion—that the voluntary sector is now a heavy hitter, and it must be counted in with the big boys.

It's one way of looking at it, but I must confess I'm drawn to the other approach, first outlined to me by a leading voluntary organisation guru when the composition of the Civic Forum was announced. 'It's a way of shafting us', he explained. Trimble has deliberately filled the seats with people from voluntary organisations because he knows we'll bore everyone to death, and the Civic Forum will simply wither away. This analysis—apart from sounding persuasively accurate—has one other advantage, in that it is in the best tradition of conspiracy theory, so beloved by those who inhabit community politics. I remember my naive faith in the radical potential of the community movement being somewhat shaken back in the 1970s when it was explained to me that community development had its origins in the British colonial administration of Africa, where it had been developed as a counter-intelligence strategy. The whole thing, it seemed, was nothing more than a plot by the Brits. So, er, why are we doing it then? I asked. The answer was, if I remember it properly, that we had to see it as a site of struggle, an opportunity to establish dual systems of authority, and to snatch significant powers away from the state.

Not a bad theory, at least in theory not a bad theory, the problem was just that the process quickly began to reverse itself. Beginning with the Reagan-Thatcher years the state proved itself all too willing to shed responsibilities onto other social actors. The shrinking of governments everywhere was accompanied by a worldwide boom in voluntary organisations willing to take over key services, often using the language of community empowerment. The NICVA figures for the voluntary sector here, impressive though they are, have to be seen in the context of a tidal movement that has washed across continents: in Australia, for example, more than half of all the country's welfare services are supplied by an estimated 11,000 not-for-profit organisations, Kenya has 23,000 women's organisations, while in Hungary it is becoming impossible for the state authorities to keep up with the regulation of the NGO sector because of the thousands of new voluntary organisations wishing to register each month.

The pattern everywhere is the same: a wholesale restructuring of government which has re-positioned the state as a purchaser and as a regulator, rather than a provider, of certain key services. For the voluntary organisations there has been a corresponding shift in political orientation, with service contracts and partnership arrangements very often replacing oppositional politics. In Northern Ireland, however, the voluntary sector can lay claim to one additional political dimension which is of huge importance. Throughout thirty years of communal conflict the network of local community organisations provided a kind of invisible stitching which held the fabric of this society together. When, as sometimes happens, this argument is pitched too high or when—another occasional failing—local voluntary chieftains are seen to be taking too much credit onto themselves for the success of the peace process, then an understandable resentment is provoked, with the politicians being particularly scornful. The referendum campaign, which saw the voluntary organisations run for cover or retreat into neutral-sounding positions, can be seen as exposing the hollowness of some of the larger political claims of the sector. Its failure at that moment, however, does not represent the final verdict on community politics.

Nothing can take away from the quiet heroism that kept the networks of community support alive at local level during the dark days of the troubles. Equally, it should not be used to foreshadow the experiment in democracy that is the Civic Forum. Whether it succeeds or whether it fails, its performance will in many ways be seen as the final judgement on community politics in Northern Ireland. ♦

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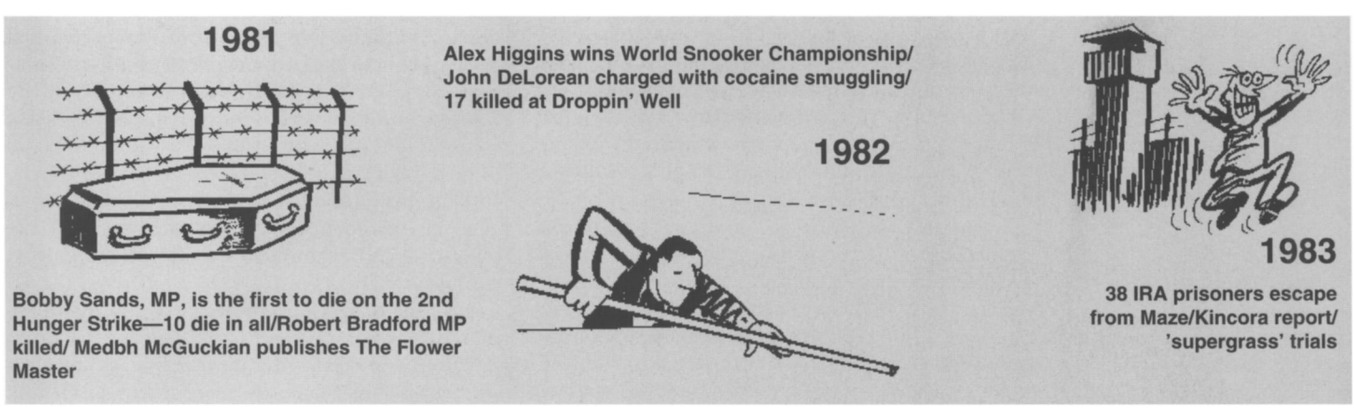
1981
Alex Higgins wins World Snooker Championship/ John DeLorean charged with cocaine smuggling/ 17 killed at Droppin' Well
1982
1983
Bobby Sands, MP, is the first to die on the 2nd Hunger Strike—10 die in all/Robert Bradford MP killed/ Medbh McGuckian publishes The Flower Master
38 IRA prisoners escape from Maze/Kincora report/ 'supergrass' trials

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